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WAR WITH IRAQ / DEVELOPMENTS IN D.C.

Resolution Opposed by 11 Wary Democrats

Members of the House, including five from California, vote against expressing support for U.S. troops and Bush. Some saw it as a trap.

By Richard Simon
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WASHINGTON -- Once the bombing of Iraq started, most members of Congress -- even those who have opposed the march to war -- rallied around President Bush.

The clear exceptions -- 11 House members.

The 11, all Democrats and almost half from California, broke ranks with their party leaders to oppose a resolution -- approved shortly after 3 a.m. EST Friday -- expressing support for U.S. troops and the commander in chief.

All the dissenters stressed that they, like their colleagues, support the troops. But Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Wash.), who posted an explanation of his "no" vote on his congressional Web site, objected that the resolution suggested an endorsement of Bush's policies.

"I, for one, will not be forced to praise the president's decisions, when what I want to do is praise the troops," McDermott said.

A Navy veteran, McDermott drew fire from Republicans when he criticized Bush during a visit to Iraq last fall with two House colleagues.

Rep. Diane Watson (D-Los Angeles), one of five California Democrats to oppose the resolution, accused Republicans of playing politics with war.

"I support the troops," she said. "But I will not be coerced into endorsing the president's failure to resolve the Iraq dispute peacefully. We are not at war because it is necessary. We are at war because the president failed to find a diplomatic solution to this problem."

The resolution received 392 "yea" votes, while 22 members abstained by voting "present."

Along with backing for the troops, the resolution expressed "unequivocal support" for Bush as commander in chief. It praised his "firm leadership and decisive action" in the military action "as part of the ongoing Global War on Terrorism."

The measure was approved after lengthy negotiations between Democratic and Republican leaders over its wording.

Stuart Roy, a spokesman for House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas), said GOP leaders worked with the Democrats to devise language that would "get broad bipartisan support, and I think we did that."

Some Democrats said they still objected to parts of the resolution's phrasing, but voted for it because they did not want to be branded unpatriotic.

Don Kettl, a University of Wisconsin political scientist, said the concern among many Democrats was that the resolution "is a trap ... of having 'support the troops' bleed into 'support the president while waging war,' and then having that bleed into 'support the president.' "

The other Californians to vote against the resolution were Reps. Maxine Waters of Los Angeles, Barbara Lee of Oakland, Mike Honda of San Jose and Pete Stark of Hayward.

Also voting against it were Reps. John Conyers of Michigan, Charles B. Rangel of New York, Robert C. Scott of Virginia, Edolphus Towns of New York and Stephanie Tubbs Jones of Ohio.

The Senate on Thursday approved a shorter resolution that expressed support for the troops and Bush as commander in chief, 99-0.

When Congress in October approved a resolution authorizing Bush to use force, if he deemed it necessary, to disarm Iraq of suspected weapons of mass destruction, the measure passed the House 296 to 133, with 126 Democrats among the opponents.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-San Francisco), was one of those voting against the October resolution but for the new measure. "When we go into battle, despite our differences on policy, when we go into battle, it will be one team, one fight," she said.

But Waters said, "Every member of Congress -- Democrats and Republicans alike -- strongly support our men and women in uniform." But she accused Republicans of drafting a resolution "designed to trap the opposition into supporting a war that we do not support."

Lee said that "as a soldier's daughter," she supports the troops. But she said that she could not support a resolution that endorses the war.

"I believed and still believe diplomatic alternatives existed," she said. "The inspections process was working. Keeping our troops out of harm's way has been and remains first and foremost on my mind and in my heart."

Shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Lee was the lone vote in Congress against a resolution that granted Bush the authority to launch the military operation that led to the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Rep. Robert T. Matsui (D-Sacramento), who heads the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee,

said he did not think the vote would hurt the dissenters. He noted that they come from safe Democratic districts, and many represent areas where antiwar sentiment is high.

Some political analysts said the "no" vote might even help some of the dissenters.

Benjamin Ginsberg, a political scientist at Johns Hopkins University, said lawmakers from strongly liberal districts are "not only free to voice their opposition to the president and to the war, but also earn credit with their constituents and among liberal Democratic contributors for appearing to place conscience ahead of political interest."

Of the 22 lawmakers who voted present, all were Democrats except for Republican Ron Paul of Texas.

Those voting present included Rep. Dennis J. Kucinich (D-Ohio), who has stressed his opposition to Bush's Iraq policy as a contender for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination.

Rep. Sam Farr (D-Carmel) was the only Californian to vote "present." He said it was not an easy decision.

"Frankly, this was a rally around George Bush resolution, not so much just the troops," said Farr. But Farr said he also wanted to support the troops.

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